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Decision-making in partnership: tools to support partnership planning

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Recently, there have been several scathing critiques of student engagement research for being under-theorised (Gourlay, 2016; MacFarlane & Tomlinson, 2017), and whilst this is a significant generalisation with the danger of undermining many beneficial student engagement efforts, there is a growing sense that we must ensure co-creation, partnership and student engagement work retains or adopts a critical stance. In this context, I have had some concerns that it is not always clear who makes decisions and how decisions are made within partnerships and it is sometimes overlooked that students and staff might have different roles in co-creation at different stages. In response, I present below three different frameworks that I have found useful in furthering discussions about decision-making in partnership: 1) Early design decisions in co-creating curricula (Bovill, 2014); 2) Decision mode levels (Heron, 1992); and the participation matrix (DFID, 2003; Konings, Bovill & Woolner 2017; Bovill, 2017). These frameworks enable us to analyse how different individuals are involved in different ways at different stages of any co-creation process.

The first of these frameworks (Bovill, 2014) is based on research that investigated co-created curricula in the UK, Ireland and the USA. The research demonstrated that it was common practice for staff to make a range of decisions prior to involving students in co-creating curricula. These decisions included, for example, which students would be involved: all the students in a class/cohort, or a selection of students; and whether the students selected to be involved were retrospective students (last year's students), current students or future students about to study a course. Other 'pre-decisions' included whether the partnership project would focus on course or programme level curricula, whether students were able to make decisions about curriculum content and/or process, and whether the students were to be rewarded or not for their participation (for example, through payment, vouchers or course credit).

The second framework from Heron (1992) highlights that staff are often ultimately in control of co-creation or partnership initiatives focused on learning and teaching, but that there are multiple levels (and opportunities) where staff can either *direct*, *negotiate* or *delegate* decision-making power. Heron (1992) describes direction as staff making decisions for students, negotiation as staff making decisions with students, and delegation as students having autonomy to make decisions on their own. Ultimately, he argues that whichever decision mode is adopted is decided by staff, who often act as gatekeepers to curriculum design (Bourner, 2004; Bovill, 2014).

Heron argues that decisions take place on four levels. Level one focuses on decision-making within a learning activity. Here the teacher decides when to direct, negotiate or delegate decision-making within, for example, a problem based question used in a tutorial. Level two focuses on planning a learning activity. So for example, does the teacher negotiate with students to suggest how the problem based learning

activity will run, or does the teacher simply direct the activity? Level three is where staff choose the decision mode to be used in planning the learning activity. So the teacher decides whether to invite students to negotiate which activities would be appropriate, relevant and engaging in a class. Level four is where the teacher chooses the decision mode to use in choosing the decision mode to be used in planning. No, that's not a typographical mistake! Heron argues that the most common form of decision mode in Level four is direction and he states that "facilitators tend to wilt rather when I go on about levels 3 and 4; it does require something like an altered or at any rate an extended state of consciousness to keep effectively alert at those levels. But...until we have mastered those levels and know that we are using them and how we are using them – which usually means being directive at 3 as well as 4 so that we unilaterally choose decision modes for level 2 – then we have not really taken charge of our power to empower our learners...in other words, facilitators are, at crucial points in the process of learning, exercising a subtle kind of unilateral directive authority. No facilitator can abdicate from it at level 4, and will usually use it at level 3" (Heron, 1992:71). Finally, Heron emphasises that "...the decision modes of direction, negotiation and delegation will be used in differing serial and concurrent ways on any progressive course as it unfolds" (Heron, 1992:69).

The third framework is the participation matrix that has been used frequently in the international development sector (DFID, 2003). This matrix outlines a set of project stages, and then maps against these stages a range of possible participation levels appropriate for different stakeholders including: *inform*, *consult*, *participate*, *partnership* or *control*. What this demonstrates is that there may be situations where it is not appropriate for other participants to be involved deeply, but they may still need to be kept informed of progress. One adaptation of the participation matrix by Könings, Bovill and Woolner (2017), is focused on participatory building design in education. The framework is able to highlight the way that, for example, the architect's involvement, the community's involvement, and students' involvement in designing a school or university changes significantly from planning through to building utilisation.

These frameworks are useful to stimulate discussion about decision-making in partnerships. The first and second frameworks reveal that staff often make pre-decisions before students are invited into partnerships in learning and teaching. While the second and third frameworks also challenge a common assumption that all students need to be involved in the same ways in all stages of a project (Bovill, 2017).